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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a series of questions that state policymakers can use to assess the systemic nature of their education reform efforts. Suggestions are offered for identifying the evidence of scope, coherence, and balance of reform. To assess the scope of reform, a first step is to determine if the performance-based standards provide the organizing principle for state reform efforts. The next step is to evaluate all aspects of the system and its provision of equity. To monitor coherence of a reform effort, policymakers should coordinate curriculum frameworks, develop an assessment instrument that measures the original performance-based goals, and provide teacher training that reflects changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To achieve a balance between centralized and decentralized forces, it is suggested that states encourage creativity and flexibility among schools to meet statewide educational goals. (LMI)

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Systemic Reform— Monitoring Its Progress

by Soleil Gregg, AEL Staff

Introduction

In the past decade, local districts and states have undertaken "the most thorough and sustained effort to reform the American public educational system in our history" (Murphy, 1991, p.49). What distinguishes current efforts from those of previous decades is their scope, coherence, and balance between state and local control. Current discussion focuses on how to move the entire system of education to a new level of excellence. Many are beginning to use the term systemic reform to characterize this holistic process. Discussed here are a series of questions policymakers can use to assess the systemic nature of their education reform efforts.

Broadening the Scope of Reform

The scope, or extent, of today's reform is more expansive than previous reform efforts. It involves a fundamental rethinking of the education system, based on a common vision of effective schools and high expectations for student performance. According to the Business Roundtable and the National Alliance of Business (1992, p.1), a focus on student outcomes is "key to the movement to bring about systemic change in public schools," for it indicates a radical shift from a system based on input and process to one based on outcomes and results. This shift in focus requires educators and policymakers to change from an emphasis on maintaining a system of schools to a concern for creating a student-centered environment for learning.

Results-oriented education affects the scope of reform by targeting the whole education system instead of its parts. Previous policy focused on raising the basic skill level of low-achieving students through mandates and the implementation of isolated programs. Based on the assumption that all students can learn,

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proponents of present reform efforts acknowledge that the performance ceiling must also be raised if all students are to develop the higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills required by today's workplace (Cohen, M., 1987). This means that instead of targeting isolated components and functions of the school system, especially teachers and students (Murphy, 1991), reform must involve the entire system, including—but not limited to—curriculum, textbook selection, professional training and development, assessment, and governance.

What evidence should policymakers seek to determine if the scope of reform in their state is sufficiently broad?

Policymakers must first determine if performance-based standards are the organizing principle for state reform efforts. They can then evaluate all aspects of the education system, i.e., the curriculum framework, instructional materials, student assessment, professional development, and governance policies, to see if all promote desired performance outcomes. They can also make sure the restructured system provides equally for all students, regardless of ability or background. A concern about the scope of reform naturally leads to a concern for coherence. Scope describes the extent of programs and policies affected by reform in quantitative terms, and coherence describes their qualitative relationship to the unifying goal of student performance.

Keeping Reform Coherent

A recognized barrier to previous reform efforts has been the "fragmented, complex, multi-layered" nature of the education system itself. Governed by several uncoordinated agencies, [the system] suffers from conflicting goals, piecemeal, short-term solutions to problems, and the instability of political change (Smith & O'Day, 1990, p.237).

Any changes in curriculum, instructional materials or methods, and assessment need to be supported by appropriate changes in teacher training if the entire program is to succeed.

This fragmentation in policy and organizational structure has produced an instructional system with no head and many uncoordinated parts. Curriculum may not be directed by common goals for student performance, instructional materials are sometimes irrelevant to the curriculum, state and national assessments frequently do not relate to classroom instruction, and teacher preparation is often determined by the preferences and biases, within mandated limits, of colleges of teacher education.

What evidence is there that policies throughout the system are coherent?

Policymakers can be guided by experts' opinions that all components of the instructional process must be coordinated if instruction is to be efficient and effective (Armstrong, Davis, Odden, & Gallagher, 1989; Clune, 1991; Cohen, A., 1987). Instructional efficiency and coordination depend on the formulation of high-quality performance standards and education goals, based on the knowledge and performance skills that students should have at the end of instruction (Clune, 1991). Curriculum frameworks need to be constructed from these goals, with textbooks and instructional materials chosen to match the curriculum.

An important step in creating systemic coherence is the development of an assessment instrument that measures the original performance-based goals. States are aware that standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests are insufficient for measuring higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills (Cohen, A.,1987; Elmore, 1992). Also, these tests are often unrelated to local instructional practices and goals. States are presently seeking and developing measures aligned with their goals for student performance.

Teacher preparation is a vital link in the instructional whole. Policymakers will want to see if schools of education incorporate the latest research on learning and thinking skills into teacher training (Kysilko, 1991). Preservice and inservice professional development programs need to be of high quality and well coordinated with desired instructional outcomes (Smith & O'Day, 1990). Any changes in curriculum, instructional materials or methods, and assessment need to be supported by appropriate changes in teacher training if the entire program is to succeed.

Balancing Reform Efforts

Balance refers to the equilibrium between a centralized and decentralized change process in school reform (Clune, 1991). Past reform efforts have taken the form of administrative input, delivered as "top-down" mandates to schools and districts about such issues as graduation requirements, school attendance, and students' scores on national, norm-referenced tests (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1991). Current reform shifts the focus from input to outcomes, in recognition that student performance in local schools is both the object of reform and the measure of educational success (Clune,1991; Smith & O'Day, 1990; Timar, 1989). Therefore, policymakers have supported strategies —such as site-based decisionmaking, teacher empowerment, and parental involvement— that stimulate change from the "bottom-up." New models of reform stress a balance of power: the state, through leadership and support, provides the framework, resources, and capacity for schools to meet educational goals; the schools are given the flexibility and resources to choose and implement the instructional strategies that will help their particular students meet the specified outcomes or goals (Brandt, 1990; Sa, 1992).

What evidence should state policymakers seek to determine a balance between centralized and decentralized forces?

Is the balance of reform both centralized—to provide leadership, support, and equity for all schools—and decentralized—to allow localities the flexibility of deciding how best to meet educational goals for their students? States must decide for themselves how best to achieve this. Their decisions can be based on traditional relationships between state agencies and local districts, financial considerations, leadership at state and local levels, and the shared vision of successful schools. For schools to change in meaningful ways, "they need both the authority to make educationally relevant decisions...and freedom from constraining regulations. This requires that districts devolve authority to schools...." (David & Shields, 1991, p.22).

Setting student-focused education goals, developing a curriculum framework, and choosing assessment instruments are the keys to maintaining educational standards for the whole system while encouraging local creativity and flexibility. With those in place, empowered local districts can know where they are headed; examine their students' needs, strengths, and weaknesses; and make adjustments and changes that are necessary to reach the goals (Brandt, 1990). Again, the state's assessment instrument, which measures a school's overall performance, is a powerful tool for implementing reform.

Conclusion

Current efforts to reform education are fundamentally different from previous efforts in scope, coherence, and balance between governing agencies and local schools and districts. Policymakers face an unprecedented challenge to find systematic ways to implement, monitor, and evaluate the reform policy that they put in place. Throughout the ongoing reform process, state leaders will want to ask key questions to determine the scope, coherence, and balance of change. They may also want to examine some alternative accountability mechanisms that can be used to monitor and evaluate the progress and results of education reform.

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Editor's Note: This article was excerpted from a recent issue of AEL's *Policy Briefs*, which you may obtain free of charge (see AEL/ERIC Order Form). The complete brief discusses state and federal policies most likely to support education reform. It also summarizes alternative models of accountability mechanisms in use in several states.